

# The Young and Democracy

by Michael Curtis



**For it's hard, you will find, to be narrow of mind if you're young at heart.**

The dilemma is that youth satisfaction with liberal democratic ideals is declining over time and by generation. Perhaps, dissatisfaction reflects apathy about the actual functioning of democratic institutions in practice. If it is simply the latter, the explanation is that young people are unable to find the ideology and identity of practicing political parties or politicians acceptable to them. But more likely, youth citizens may hold that systems based on the core existing democratic processes, compromise, consensus, acceptance of political opponents as morally legitimate, do not deliver desirable results. They may believe that political opponents, lacking that legitimacy, should not hold public office, and even be harassed and excluded from public debate because they hold differing political views. One result of this viewpoint is that a considerable part of the European youth population does not believe that democracy is the best form of government. It is not easy to explain why, in Latin America or Western Europe older generations have been

satisfied with their democratic institutions, while younger people are more dissatisfied.

Globally, young people today are less satisfied with the performance of democracy than older generations. This is true of the majority of millennials, those born 1981-96, and most members of Generation X, born 1965-1980, although the majority of baby boomers, 1944-64, and now in their 70s, did not express a similar degree of discontent. The attitude of the baby boomers, say in Western Europe, seems to reflect the view that satisfaction with democracy had peaked with the generation that came of age at the end of the Cold War.

These issues are discussed in a recent study, "Youth and Satisfaction with Democracy," issued in October 2020 by the Center for the Future of Democracy at Cambridge University based on a global dataset, 45 sources covering 60 countries, and 4.8 million respondents. What it finds is deeply disturbing. The study indicates that across the world younger generations are not only more dissatisfied, almost a double, with democratic performance than their predecessors, but are also more discontented than previous generations at similar life stages. Youth satisfaction with democracy is declining not only in absolute terms, but also relative to attitudes of previous generations at the same life stage. The likely explanation is that young people lack memories of former authoritarian rule, and thus judge democracy not in comparison to that past but in terms of current problems such as corruption and failure to deliver adequate services. Interestingly, the millennials were more satisfied with democracy than their parent's generation, but they turned negative with the economic recession of the early 2000s.

Because of their perception of the failure of democracies, a considerable part of the youth population has been unwilling to see society as more than a zero-sum contest, the arena of genuine competing points of view and interests which will be determined by representative institutions and contests for

public office. Instead, they are inclined to see society as divided into two camps, good and bad, the righteous and the deplorables, and to view political opponents as "Manichaeian," inherently morally flawed and lacking moral integrity.

Consequently, two factors are present. One is that the young who are dissatisfied may tend to embrace populist parties, extremist politics, both of the right and the left, that challenge mainstream parties. Younger people are significantly less likely to have the opinion that those with whom they disagree are equally moral as themselves, to accept their opponents possess equal dignity and moral worth and that they have an equal right to express their views and to contest public office. The second is that the young are less likely to attempt to revive the political center. Some evidence shows that the decline has been not only in youth satisfaction, but also in youth support for democratic systems.

Why this discontent with those mainstream parties and why is it rising faster than in earlier generations? In developed countries, North America, the UK, Australia, the obvious factor is poor economic performance, the high levels of youth unemployment, higher cost of living, and increasing wealth inequality. The dissatisfaction is in both absolute and relative terms, between youth and older generations. Social problems abound: inequalities between the generations, inequality between different sections of a country, discrimination against certain ethnic groups, as well as corruption.

Younger citizens have problems finding secure employment, homeownership, or advancing economically without inherited wealth or privilege. Attempts have been made in many countries to overcome the problems; witness, welfare policies (Poland) expansion of public sector employment (Greece), control of corruption (India). Youth discontent leads to attraction of populist groups, organizations breaking with economic orthodoxy, both on the left and on the far right as in France,

with Marine Le Pen's *Rassemblement National*, and in Belgium, *Vlaams Belang*.

The Cambridge study suggests another explanation, what it terms signs of "transition fatigue," for dissatisfaction in emerging democracies, developing countries in Asia, Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and southern Europe. The suggestion is that younger people are less prone to remember the past authoritarian rule and the experience of the struggles to obtain democracy in their country by older generations, but they are familiar with incompetence, corruption, and denial of the rule of law in their country. This is the case in a number of countries. The Lava Jato (car wash) investigation of a money laundering scheme that began in 2014 in Brazil, the largest investigation of corruption in that country's history led to indictments and imprisonment of well known political figures. Similar political problems were manifest elsewhere. The Gupta Report of 2016 in South Africa, involved the president and other ministers who sanctioned the use of state companies for personal enrichment. Dissatisfaction increased with the Rywin affair in Poland, 2002-4, and the Tangentopoli in Italy, 1992-4.

Younger voters support anti-system candidates opposed to corruption, and promising to overthrow the existing authorities. This has been true of less extreme candidates. Volodymyr Zelensky in Ukraine or, somewhat less centrist, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. Populists succeeded in Ukraine, where Zelensky, with his party Secret of the People, purportedly an antiestablishment party for the common people, in 2019 promises to deal with corruption, foreign interference, and illiberalism. Brazil with Jair Bolsonaro presents an authoritarian illiberal backlash.

Attempts to revive the political center have rarely been able to reconcile the younger generation with democracy. Populism responds to real frustration in society with its argument it represents the pure people, the will of the people. The

increase in populism indicates that existing systems have not resolved pressing economic and social issues. There may be a temporary increase in satisfaction with the system during the early years of a populist ruler. But populism offers few permanent solutions. is unlikely to do so in the long run. It is at best a short term remedy, Two factors become evident, It becomes evident that the grandiose promises of populism cannot be fulfilled. The second is inevitable conflict, internal gridlock, with other institutions, the independent courts, civil service, and international organizations.

Because of its very hostility to existing institutions, and the likelihood of economic mismanagement, and scandals in office, populism tends to create a crisis of democratic legitimacy when it is in power.

The picture is not all negative. In some areas, in northern Europe, northeast Asia, and in post Soviet Union democracies, younger generations appear more satisfied than their elders were in the past. This seems to be the case in Germany, South Korea, and Ukraine. But it is still valid that younger generations in developed democracies are more dissatisfied with the idea of democracy and the performance of democratic countries than previous generations.

The task in the U.S. and other Western democracies is to devise processes to restore faith in a world of systemic discontent and populist outbreaks. Democracy must be reborn, not decay.